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THE TRUTH ABOUT BEETHOVEN*

BY ERNEST NEWMAN

It may come as a surprise to the ordinary reader of musical history and biography to be told that more than any other composer Beethoven stands in need of an authentic Life. If there is any composer whose movements, whose correspondence, even whose conversation can be tracked month by month, almost day by day, it is Beethoven. In some ways our information about him is even more copious than our information about Wagner, for in the case of the latter we have none of the Conversation Books that fix for us some of the actual talks between Beethoven and his friends as definitely as if these had been recorded for the gramophone. There are many Lives of Beethoven, many volumes of reminiscences of him, many editions of or selections from his letters, many reconstructions of him by more or less imaginative literary portrait painters. And yet it is safe to say that hardly one music-lover in a million knows Beethoven as he really was, or can separate the truth from the fiction in the scores of romantic stories that are current concerning him. Everyone knows the ordinary sentimentalised bust or portrait of Beethoven—a Beethoven visibly conscious of the necessity for living up, so far as appearances go, to the general conception of him as a Titan staggering under the too vast orb of his fate. The literary portraits we have of him are, almost without exception, equally sentimentalised. It is time that the man Beethoven was drawn from the life, not evolved out of the inner consciousness of each successive biographer.

We all know the Beethoven of the poetical legend—a sick eagle fretted by crows and sparrows, a Prometheus and a Faust in one, a man picked out from the beginning as a target for the Evil One, poor, misunderstood, neglected, injured by false friends, and finally broken by the base ingratitude of the nephew to whom he had given himself with a devotion and a self-sacrifice unparalleled either in real life or in fiction. This figure touched the sensibilities and the sympathies of men as that of no other composer has done—how, indeed, could anyone refuse sympathy to the tragic spectacle of one of the greatest of composers deprived of his hearing? And, anxious to have full justification for its expenditure of emotion, mankind was willing to go to any length of credulity where a Beethoven anecdote was concerned, so long only as it touched the source of tears. Let a simple example suffice.

One of the best-known legends is that after his return from Gneixendorf to Vienna in the early days of December, 1826, with the violent cold that was the beginning of his fatal illness, he lay ill for some days before he could get medical attention, and then received it only by an accident. According to Schindler, the wicked nephew Karl, instead of summoning a doctor, either deliberately neglected or forgot to do so. He went about his usual sinful pleasures, of which billiard-playing was one; and in the course of a game he happened, some days after, to remember his uncle's commission. He casually mentioned it to the marker, asking him to send a doctor. The marker, being unwell, neglected to do so for some time; but finding himself in a hospital he mentioned the matter to the doctor in charge—one Wawruch, who thereupon repaired to Beethoven. This story, according to Schindler, was told him by Dr. Wawruch himself. But there is not a word of truth in it: Thayer's language is not too strong when he calls it a 'shameless fabrication.' It is disproved by the account of Beethoven's illness (written by Wawruch less than two months after the composer's death and published in 1842), and by the Conversation Book. 'I was not called in until the third day,' says Wawruch, and Karl's entries in the Conversation Book confirm this. The doctor first visited the patient on December 5. Beethoven had arrived at his lodgings on December 2. In an undated letter to Carl Holz, which was no doubt written on either December 4 or 5 (for he speaks of having arrived 'a few days ago,' and of a previous letter, also written after his arrival, having been mislaid), he refers to his illness in a way that shows he did not regard it as serious,* and says he would be delighted if Holz would come and see him. Karl must have delivered this letter without delay; and Holz must have called on Beethoven at once, sent to Wawruch at once, and secured the immediate attendance of the latter at the Schwarzspanierhaus. Karl's entries relating to the physician's visit end on December 14; and the evidence of the Conversation Book is conclusive that Schindler did not see Beethoven till some time after that date.

A hundred similar cases of error or perversion of the truth could be cited. What is the explanation of them? In part, the errors are honest; events are only dimly remembered after the lapse of many years, and in any case the narrator of an event necessarily saw only one aspect of it. But a good deal of the confusion has come from the pardonable desire of each of the great man's friends to pose as *the* friend. Schindler's jealousy of the others, and particularly of Holz, is notorious. Now the peculiar relation of Schindler to Beethoven gave him exceptional opportunities for legend-floating. It was known that he had been a sort of secretary to the composer for some years, that he was with him in the last days, and that the

* *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven*, by Alexander Wheelock Thayer. Edited, revised, and amended from the original English manuscript and the German editions of Hermann Deiters and Hugo Riemann, concluded, and all the documents newly translated, by Henry Edward Krehbiel. New York, the Beethoven Association: London, Novello. 3 vols., £5 5s. net.

* 'Immediately after my arrival, which took place a few days ago, I wrote to you, but my letter was mislaid; thereupon I became unwell, so that I thought it better to stay in bed.'

famous Conversation Books* had come into his keeping after Beethoven's death. His biography of the composer, therefore (first edition, 1840; second edition, 1845; third edition, 1860), seemed to have every title to be considered authoritative. In the course of time, doubts were cast on many of his statements; but few people realised the full extent of his untrustworthiness. Grove, in his article on him in the Dictionary, says that 'Schindler has been the object of much obloquy and mistrust, but it is satisfactory to know, on the authority of A. W. Thayer, that this is unfounded, and that his honesty and intelligence are both to be trusted.' Nothing could well be more misleading. Thayer's considered opinion of him was this:

> 'Nothing is more common than to find circumstances accepted as undoubted facts on Schindler's authority. The present writer discussed at length Schindler's character as a biographer with Otto Jahn, both of us having known him personally. Our opinions coincided perfectly. We held him to be honest and sincere in his statements, but afflicted with a treacherous memory and a proneness to accept impressions and later-formed convictions as facts of former personal knowledge, and to publish them as such without carefully verifying them.'

Moreover, he revised his book and wrote various articles about Beethoven after the Conversation Books, which would have served to correct many of his unconscious fictions, had passed out of his keeping. But even this opinion of Thayer's, expressed in the second of the present volumes, is modified later to the disadvantage of Schindler. He plainly was not over-scrupulous where his own vanity was concerned. The true story has just been told of the early stages of Beethoven's illness. It is as clear as anything can be that Schindler did not see him till at least a fortnight after the composer's return to Vienna on December 2, whereas Holz was with him on December 4 or 5. Schindler knew that the Conversation Book was decisive on this point; and he has actually 'folded and renumbered' the pages in such a way that 'the page on which this entry [*i.e.*, Karl's entry recording all Wawruch's visits from December 5 to 14] appears, is *made to look as if it preceded others which are filled with evidences of Holz's helpfulness.*' After that, we must modify our opinion that Schindler was a bit of a fool, but an honest fool.

The truth is that he was jealous of Karl Holz, the bright and amiable young man who became Beethoven's factotum about 1825, henceforth occupying the place in his affections formerly held by Schindler. The latter consoled himself by spreading false reports about Holz—for instance, that he took Beethoven to taverns where the composer drank more than was good for him. In August, 1826, Beethoven gave Holz a document certifying that he considered him 'competent to write my eventual biography, should such a thing be desired,' and adding, 'I repose in him the fullest confidence that he will give to the world without distortion all that I have communicated to him for this purpose.' Schindler attempts to make out that this permission was 'the result of a surprise sprung upon Beethoven,' and that on his death-bed he requested Breuning and Schindler to collect his papers and hand them to Rochlitz for the purposes of a biography—a task which Rochlitz declined. But it is certain that Schindler was quietly edged out of Beethoven's life in the last year or two. It was in the spring of 1825 that Beethoven became noticeably fond of Holz. From March, 1825, to August, 1826, Beethoven and Schindler rarely met. On September 28, the composer went to stay with his brother Johann at Gneixendorf, whence he returned, on December 2, to what proved to be his death-bed.

Let me give one more instance of the uncritical way in which biographers have condemned this or that personage in the Beethoven *entourage* on the strength of the mere word of another member of it. Grove (art. 'Beethoven' in the Dictionary, says that Dr. Wawruch 'appears to have be n a poor practitioner and a pompous pedant,' who did not know how to treat the malady from which Beethoven was suffering. Grove gives as his authority for this the reminiscences of Stephan von Breuning. But Breuning was obviously prejudiced against Wawruch, no doubt because Beethoven—one of those irascible invalids who are quite 'impossible' from the point of view of the doctor and the nurse—himself conceived an antipathy against him when he found himself getting no better. Medical opinion of to-day justifies Wawruch in his diagnosis, and he seems to have treated the case—which was evidently hopeless from the first—as scientifically as any physician could have done in those days. Yet, as Thayer says, 'the criticisms of Breuning and others have pursued him through all the books devoted to Beethoven's life.'

The truth about Beethoven could only be arrived at by some investigator who would patiently sift the true from the false or the mistakes in the records of his friends, and—which is still more important—check every statement made by Beethoven about others. It has been too hastily assumed that because he was a great composer and a man of essential goodness of character he was always right and others always wrong in any matter of dispute between them. The fact is that Beethoven was more prone than most men to be unjust to those with whom he came in conflict, precisely because of his sense of the higher morality of his own motives, to say nothing of a character unusually headstrong, obstinate, and suspicious. With all his great gifts, he was not—let us say it frankly—particularly intelligent apart from his music. He seems to have admired Goethe; but there is nothing in the whole of his letters to show that his taste in literature and art was particularly

* There were originally about four hundred of these. Schindler destroyed many of them. The remainder (a hundred and eighty-three) are now in the National Library at Berlin.

good, or his knowledge of them at all extensive. To the end of his days he had difficulty with the simplest sum in addition. One of the most pathetic pictures we have of him is that of his nephew trying to teach him, on his death-bed, the rudiments of multiplication. He was prolific in moral sentiments of the most unimpeachable order; but that sort of excellence can, and often does, go along with something approaching stupidity in intellectual matters. His humour was primitive, his language, for the most part, uncouth and sometimes almost incoherent. He was purely and simply a magnificent musical instrument. It is *a priori* unlikely that a man who could not regulate sensibly the commonest details of his own daily mundane life, who was notoriously suspicious, self-centred, and quick to take offence, should have had all the wisdom on his side in his dealings with those who disagreed with him. It is the habit of biographers, to take a typical case, to assume that Beethoven was the most innocent actor and the greatest sufferer in the affair of the nephew. An impartial study of all the evidence hardly lends countenance to that assumption.

A full and judicial statement of all the facts relating to Beethoven's life is to be found nowhere but in the biography by Thayer that is now for the first time made accessible in English. Alexander Wheelock Thayer was born in Massachusetts in 1817, and died in 1897. In his early thirties he conceived the ambition of writing an authentic Beethoven biography on the basis of the reminiscences of Schindler, Wegeler, Ries, and others. With this purpose in view he went to Europe in 1849, and spent two years making researches in different towns. After a visit to America he returned to Europe in 1854. A study of the Beethoven documents in the Berlin Royal Library convinced him that it was useless to rely implicitly on the published reminiscences of anyone. There was nothing for it but a first-hand examination of all the existing evidence, and the discovery of as much new evidence as possible. The remainder of his long life was devoted to this task. To support himself he had to take the post of American Consul at Trieste, the duties of which office interfered materially with his main work.

He went about his work with the most exemplary thoroughness. He interviewed 'every person of importance then living who had been in any way associated with Beethoven, or had personal recollections of him'—Schindler, Hüttenbrenner (in whose arms the composer died), Neate, Potter, the widow of the nephew Karl, Moscheles, Gerhard von Breuning (son of Beethoven's old friend, Stephan von Breuning), and many others. The Berlin Royal Library sent the *Conversation Books* to Trieste for him to study at his leisure. He examined every possible document, followed up every possible clue. In 1865 he had ready the manuscript of his first volume, carrying the record of Beethoven's life down to 1796. This was translated into German by Dr. Hermann Deiters, of Bonn, and published in that language in 1866. The second volume followed in 1872, and the third in 1879, both translated by Deiters; the record was now complete as far as 1816. Then the strain became too much for Thayer: his health worsened, and he never afterwards felt equal to the continuance of a task that had become more and more difficult as it neared the end—although he still had energy for other literary work. A suggestion made by Mr. H. E. Krehbiel that Thayer should complete the biography with the aid of an intelligent secretary fell through.

When Thayer died, in 1897, his papers were sent to his niece, Mrs. Jabez Fox, of Cambridge, Mass. Deiters was willing to revise the three published volumes for a second edition, and to write the fourth. For the latter purpose the papers were gone through by Mr. Krehbiel, and the necessary ones sent to Deiters, who had brought out a new edition of the first volume in 1891. Deiters then decided that before revising the second and third volumes he would complete the biography. This ran to two more volumes. The proofs of the fourth were hardly in his hands when he died, in 1907. The two final volumes were brought out in 1908 under the supervision of Dr. Hugo Riemann, who also produced the revised versions of vol. ii. and vol. iii., in 1910-11.

Then Mr. Krehbiel, at Mrs. Fox's request, took in hand the preparation of an English edition. He condensed the five German volumes, omitting the musical analyses and dissertations of Deiters, abolishing certain appendices and foot-notes, incorporating the substance of many letters in the text, and so on, using as much as possible of Thayer's original manuscript, and adhering to Thayer's purpose as expressed in a letter to Sir George Grove of 1895:

> 'Being as free as the German editors [he says] in respect of the portion of the biography which did not come directly from the pen of Thayer, the editor of this English edition [*i.e.*, Mr. Krehbiel himself] chose his own method of presentation touching the story of the last decade of Beethoven's life, keeping in view the greater clearness and rapidity of narrative which, he believed, would result from a grouping of material different from that followed by the German editors in their adherence to the strict chronological method established by Thayer.'

Where the German editors differ from Thayer, as a rule Mr. Krehbiel lets the latter speak for himself, the differences being set forth in foot-notes. The material for this English edition was ready in July, 1914. The war delayed publication of it. In 1920 the Beethoven Association of New York, acting on the suggestion of Mr. O. G. Sonneck and Mr. Harold Bauer, devoted the proceeds of its concerts of the previous season to promoting the issue of these handsome and tasteful volumes.

Thayer's patient investigation of facts and unimpassioned statement of them help us to see

Beethoven more nearly as he must have been than even the reminiscences of his friends can do. These volumes should give the quietus to many of the legends so dear to the sentimental biographer. It is commonly supposed that Beethoven as a composer had to fight all his life for recognition against an ignorant Press and an indifferent public. The facts are that his genius was recognised from the beginning, that contemporary criticism in general was very laudatory, that from an early stage of his career his name was linked with those of Mozart and Haydn, and that his name was a 'draw' for the Viennese concert-going public. There were dissentient voices, of course, but on the whole Beethoven met with not less but more recognition during his lifetime than falls to the lot of most men of genius. To try to make out that Vienna had no ears for any music but that of the Rossini type is to show a lamentable ignorance of the facts.

Thayer's handling of the affair of the nephew Karl, again, shows it in a different light from the usual one. Almost without exception, the biographers have held that all the virtue was on Beethoven's side in this affair, and all the vice on the side of Karl and his mother. No one can read the full record without feeling that the merits and demerits of each side about balance each other: if there is anybody who deserves our special sympathy it is Karl. The ordinary biographer seems to have found it impossible to place himself at the boy's point of view, still less at that of the mother. Beethoven's prejudice against the latter is well-known. He not only called her the Queen of Night; he made reckless statements about her that in these days would have subjected him to an action for slander, and possibly heavy damages. She was certainly no better than she should have been; but even a bad woman may have a sincere affection for her son, and resent her deceased husband's brother's attempt to assume the sole guardianship of him. It is significant that the Courts of the time, although they knew of her occasional moral lapses, were balanced between her and Beethoven in the matter. As for the nephew, is there not every reason to think that it was precisely Beethoven who unwittingly helped to drive him into evil courses? What sort of a companion was a gloomy, choleric, ill-mannered composer of middle age—and deaf into the bargain—for a high-spirited boy? Could anything be more pathetic than the evidence in Court of this little fellow of twelve at the inquiry into his running away from his uncle? 'Had his uncle maltreated him?' he was asked. He replied, 'He had punished him, but only when he deserved it; he had been maltreated only once, and that after his return, when his uncle threatened to throttle him.' To the question 'Where would he rather live—at his mother's or his uncle's?' he answered, 'He would like to live at his uncle's *if he but had a companion, as his uncle was hard of hearing and he could not talk with him.*' What boy would not have revolted against so gloomy a life, and conceived a dislike for the man who forced him to endure it? The conventional sentimental biographer will have it that all the guilt was on Karl's side: Romain Rolland, for instance, thinks it 'a sad phenomenon' that 'the moral grandeur of his uncle, instead of doing him good, made him worse.' So might Mr. Pecksniff have talked. A boy of tender years could not be expected to endure constraint and misery merely because the man who inflicted them on him was the composer of some immortal works; and he would be much less likely to be impressed by the 'moral grandeur' of his uncle than by his moodiness, his frequent ill-temper, and his well-known violence of language when crossed. M. Rolland sees, again, evidence of nothing but Karl's turpitude in what he calls 'those terrible words, where his miserable soul appears so plainly,' uttered at the time of the boy's attempt at suicide: 'I grew worse because my uncle wanted me to be better.' Terrible words they are indeed; but surely, to the normal unprejudiced man, they carry as much censure for Beethoven as for Karl? Beethoven's intentions were of the best: but a good deal of suffering has been caused in this world by the good intentions of 'moral' people who thought themselves better than their fellows.

Can we resist the conclusion that Beethoven plumed himself a little too much on his 'moral grandeur' (his letters are rather too full of references to it), and on the strength of it was unduly given to interfering in the private affairs of other people? His brother Johann was no more fortunate in his matrimonial relations than the brother who was the father of Karl. Johann had had a *liaison* with a certain Therese Obermeyer, a girl of attractive appearance and, apparently, likeable character. As Thayer puts it, Johann 'became acquainted with her,* liked her, and made her his housekeeper and—something more.' Beethoven's 'moral grandeur' was instantly up in arms. His brother was then a man of thirty-five, shrewd, sensible, and in every way capable of looking after himself. Beethoven, though, as Thayer says, he 'had no more right to meddle in his private affairs than any stranger,' went to Linz expressly 'with this purpose in view.'

> 'To come hither for this express object, and employ force to accomplish it, was an indefensible assumption of authority. Such, at all events, was Johann's opinion, and he refused to submit to his brother's dictation. Excited by opposition, Ludwig resorted to any and every means to accomplish his purpose. He saw the Bishop about it. He applied to the Civil authorities. He pushed the affair so earnestly as at last to obtain an order to the police to remove the girl to Vienna if, on a certain day, she should still be found in Linz. The disgrace to the poor girl; the strong liking which Johann had for her; his natural mortification at not being allowed to

* She was the sister-in-law of the physician who occupied part of the large house owned by Johann at Linz.

be master in his own house; these and other similar causes wrought him up almost to desperation.'

There was a quarrel between the brothers; the scene, says Thayer, 'was more disgraceful to Ludwig than Johann.' The apothecary did precisely what might have been expected: he married Therese. When the marriage turned out unhappily, Beethoven had only himself to thank for having given Johann the power 'to reproach him as the author of his misfortune. Indeed, when the unhappy future came, Johann always declared that Ludwig had driven him into this marriage.' The composer's resentment against his brother endured to the end. Only on that assumption can we account for the misleading account of their final relations that we find in the dutiful pages of Schindler and Breuning—an account which Thayer shows from the Conversation Books to be untrue. 'Moral grandeur' without a ballast of good sense, good temper, and ordinary human tolerance, can be a curse both to its possessor and to all who come in contact with him.

Mr. Krehbiel notes—and proves—that Beethoven was guilty of

> '. . . . a number of lapses from high ideals of candour and justice in his treatment of his friends, and of a nice sense of honour and honesty in his dealings with his publishers; but at no time have these blemishes been so numerous or so patent as they are in his negotiations for the publication of the *Missa Solemnis*—a circumstance which is thrown into a particularly strong light by the frequency and vehemence of his protestations of moral rectitude in the letters which have risen like ghosts to accuse him, and by the strange paradox that the period is one in which his artistic thoughts and imagination dwelt in the highest regions to which they ever soared.'

Mr. Krehbiel's summary of the matter must be quoted in full:

> 'He was never louder in his protestations of business morality than when he was promising the Mass to four or more publishers practically at the same time, and giving it to none of them; never more apparently frank than when he was making ignoble use of a gentleman, whom he himself described as one of the best friends on earth, as an intermediary between himself and another friend to whom he was bound by business ties and childhood associations which challenged confidence; never more obsequious (for even this word must now be used in describing his attitude towards Franz Brentano) than after he had secured a loan from that friend in the nature of an advance on a contract which he never carried out; never more apparently sincere than when he told one publisher (after he had promised the Mass to another) that he should be particularly sorry if he were unable to give the Mass into his hands; never more forcefully and indignantly honest in appearance than when he informed still another publisher that the second h d importuned him for the Mass ('bombarded' was the word), but that he had never even deigned to answer his letters. But even this is far from compassing the indictment: the counts are not even complete when it is added that in a letter he states that the publisher whom he had told it would have been a source of sorrow not to favour had never even been contemplated amongst those who might receive the Mass; that he permitted the friend to whom he first promised the score to tie up some of his capital for a year and more so that 'good Beethoven' should not have to wait a day for his money; that after promising the Mass to the third publisher he sought to create the impression that it was not the *Missa Solemnis* that had been bargained for, but one of two Masses which he had in hand.

It is abundantly evident that Beethoven was not the plaster saint the romantic biographers have made of him. No one will think much the worse of him for having been a man of mixed clay like the rest of us; indeed, his 'moral delinquencies,' like those of Wagner, make him a more interesting study to the psychologist. In any case, the whole truth is better than a number of half lies; and students not only of Beethoven but of human nature will be grateful to Thayer and Mr. Krehbiel for having brought the composer and the man into the one focus.

BRITISH PLAYERS AND SINGERS:

I.—HAROLD SAMUEL

THE MAN AND HIS VIEWS

When Harold Samuel plays Bach he has a way of happily focussing the predilections of a dozen different sorts of music-lovers. The lions and the lambs, the simple and the supercilious, meet harmoniously on this ground. Various notions of music find for once a common denominator. The genial pianist has such a way with him that all the disparate types in the group at once amiably compose themselves. 'Now, smile a little, look pleasant!' the photographers say; but this clever focusser gets us, without a word, into the right attitude.

Where did Bach 'come in' before Mr. Samuel's day in the London pianoforte recital? In transcriptions mostly. Liszt's transcriptions of the Organ Fugues almost alone were not beneath the notice of the virtuosos. Then the Chromatic Fantasia and the Italian Concerto had concert properties which brought them the attention refused to the humble suites, partitas, and clavichord fugues. But it was 'the thing' to transcribe; we had the Goldberg Variations transcribed, toccatas, the Chromatic Fantasia, and even the